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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MUSCAT NOMINATION FOR 2008 AWARD FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN LABOR DIPLOMACY

REF: A. STATE 27854

[1](#)B. MUSCAT 138

[1](#)C. 07 MUSCAT 531

[1](#)D. 07 MUSCAT 473

[1](#)E. 07 MUSCAT 365

[1](#)1. Following up on his outstanding performance on labor issues the previous year (ref D), Labor/Human Rights Officer Andy Lentz has continued to significantly advance U.S. foreign policy interests in the labor field. As Oman's nascent independent labor unions (legalized in 2006) slowly develop into a positive force for social change, Andy's accomplishments as described below come at a critical time and will have lasting, beneficial results.

[1](#)2. As a result of negotiations to conclude the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement, the Omani government enacted sweeping labor reforms in 2006 that hold the promise of transforming the nature of labor relations in Oman and improving the rights of workers, both foreign and Omani. These reforms may also serve as a positive model for change in the entire Middle East region. To be effective, however, they must be fully enforceable in the Omani legal system. After identifying that many judges lacked the expertise and experience to properly interpret and apply Oman's new labor law, Andy took action. After proposing a judicial training workshop on labor issues in a 2007 cable on labor programming priorities, Andy secured approval to use Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funds, identified a program implementer (the American Bar Association), and then worked with the ABA to design a two-day course focusing on the most important legal points for the judges. Tellingly, one of the judges remarked that it was the first time that he and his colleagues had the opportunity to discuss the new labor law with Oman's Ministry of Manpower.

[1](#)3. To follow-up on and reinforce the judicial training he made happen, Andy hit upon a tool that will have lasting impact in Oman courtrooms: a U.S.-style "benchbook." Upon hearing from lawyers and businesses that judicial decisions on labor issues often appeared inconsistent, coupled with candid admissions from judges that they needed a reference tool to help them better understand the law, Andy discussed options with the local ABA representatives to address this problem. Together they agreed on an innovative solution -- a benchbook modeled after those used in some U.S. courts that contains relevant statutes, commentaries on the laws, and previous court decisions interpreting key provisions. The benchbook is currently under development and promises to change the way judges rule on labor cases.

[1](#)4. With unions in Oman still in their infancy, communications between businesses and organized labor is tenuous at best in many industries. Some companies still view unions as unwelcome threats to their operations, while labor leaders have few examples to follow in dealing with

management. In some instances, this lack of dialogue has led to major misunderstandings. To help management-labor relations move ahead, Andy worked with the Public Affairs Section to pool scarce resources and organize a series of small roundtable discussions for business leaders (including CEOs of major corporations) and labor representatives from company-level unions and the General Federation of Oman's Laborers. Andy also brought in U.S. speakers to discuss specific topics such as union elections, as well as address general labor concerns. Many participants said the sessions provided them with their first chance to speak substantively with each other. At one roundtable, the CEO of an employers' association for oil and gas companies (OPAL) invited the chairman of the General Federation to jointly develop a template for communication and training.

15. Andy's hard work has already resulted in concrete results. Many of the roundtable participants, for example, have held meetings with their colleagues to share what they learned on complying with Oman's labor reforms. After consultations with Andy, the CEO of OPAL designed and organized a training program on "win-win" negotiating for Human Resources executives in oil and gas service companies, to which he also invited labor union representatives. The CEO also invited the labor expert from the judicial training program and one of Andy's roundtables to lead the sessions.

16. Despite these major successes, Andy is still advocating for more labor programming. Thanks to his extensive reporting on labor needs and opportunities for advancing U.S. labor policy, he helped secure a \$500,000 MEPI grant for the Solidarity Center to begin operations and establish an office in Oman. The technical assistance provided by the Solidarity Center will represent a major investment in the development of labor unions in Oman.

17. Andy's reporting on labor-related issues is consistently first-rate. His cables also accurately explain and analyze labor trends in Oman. Moreover, the deep, meaningful relationships that Andy has developed with contacts in labor, business and government due to his work (and his outstanding interpersonal skills) have put him right in the middle of events as they unfold, thereby increasing the value of his reporting. When a major strike occurred at the Omani port of Salalah - one of the world's busiest transshipment hubs - Andy's contacts enabled him to follow the work stoppage (the biggest in Oman in many years), which showed signs of developing into a major confrontation, and to make recommendations for action based on his analysis (refs C, D).

Andy's contacts and extensive research also enabled him to write a landmark cable on a socially taboo subject - prostitution in Oman (ref B). By digging down into the underbelly of Omani society and utilizing his many sources of information, Andy shed light on a growing problem and tied it to the overall labor picture and trafficking. As Oman develops into an increasingly important center for business and tourism, his work on this subject will take on even greater importance.

18. Outside his work on labor relations, Andy has been tireless in his efforts to help improve the situation of exploited, and possibly trafficked, workers in Oman. For example, realizing that the U.S. government practices must reflect its labor policy goals, Andy looked around the Embassy and saw a problem. Low-skilled laborers working at the Embassy as employees of a service contract company were working long hours for very low, exploitative wages. Andy quickly alerted the Front Office, which fully backed his call for action. He then wrote a cable to Washington on the situation and recommended a series of options to make sure these workers were paid a fair wage. The cable, and follow-up communications with the State Department by both Andy and the Ambassador, highlighted a similar problem elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf region and resulted in a review of NEA bureau policies that could catalyze a change in contracting policies.

¶9. Andy also identified a problem with South Asian maids resident in the neighboring United Arab Emirates (UAE), many of whom had been abused, being effectively forced to accept exploitative employment in Oman. After thoroughly researching the problem, he wrote two separate reports that included the names of labor recruitment agencies accused of facilitating this cross-border trade. G/TIP took notice of Andy's cables and backed his call for a global response by directing U.S. embassies in relevant countries to encourage governments to crack down on these suspect agencies.

¶10. Given Andy's accomplishments outlined above, particularly since he covers non-labor issues in his diverse portfolio, Ambassador Grappo and Embassy Muscat strongly recommend Andy Lentz for the 2008 Award for Excellence in Labor Diplomacy. He truly personifies the work of the Department in transforming labor practices and policies in countries in accordance with U.S. national interests.

¶11. Proposed Award Citation: For sustained reporting excellence in labor matters and outstanding contributions and support for the development of labor organizations, the protection of workers' rights, the elimination of trafficking-in-persons, and the strengthening of labor-business relations in Oman.  
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